

REFLECTIONS ON THE HAY RIVER SEMINAR

Tom Lawson

The 40th National Seminar may, I believe, prove to have been, not just an unforgettable experience, but the most important contribution to our mission in those 40 years. We introduced, for the first time, a Consensus component to complement the traditional confrontational debates. I want to explain why this innovation matters.

Three years ago, a debater from Nunavut said to me, at the end of the Vancouver Seminar, "Mr. Lawson, this has been a bad experience for me. All week long it has been nothing but confrontation. That's not the way we do things where I come from." He set me thinking.

Debating is not an end in itself. Our mission has always been to help equip our young people with basic citizenship skills, which were badly needed in the 1960s. That was the age of copout, destructive activism, and disturbing rancor between the generations, between the schools and their communities. Acute listening skills, integrity in research, persuasive speech, and openmindedness seemed enough to meet the challenge, and we mushroomed in the 70s. I dreamt of the day when no student would be unable to debate because of where that student went to school. I saw us making a significant contribution to the quality of public life in Canada.

Then, in the 80s, our growth ground to a halt. The question is why. Opportunities for debate mushroomed at all levels, but competition came to be dominated by a limited number of elite powerhouse schools, and beginner schools dropped by the wayside. I began to wonder if we were beginning to foster a generation of lawyers able to argue anything for the money, and politicians able to promise anything for the vote.

The 60s had brought us the things for which Canada has been most admired: old age pensions, unemployment insurance, and Medicare, and a reputation as the world's leading Peacemaker.

Where are we now? Tommy Douglas' legacy is under great stress, Pearson's has been lost, and the gap between rich and poor grows apace. Our Parliament, our Courts, and our Marketplace have all become dysfunctional, dominated by unrestrained confrontation. And our democratic freedoms are being steadily eroded.

Our politicians cannot look more than 4 years ahead, and have to give the Party interest priority over the public interest; our corporations cannot look more than a couple of years ahead, and have to put the interest of shareholders ahead of the public interest. The parents cannot look beyond their jobs. So I ask our high school students "Who's left with any farsightedness?!"

How are we to help equip our young people for the challenges they face? Training in exclusively

confrontational skills is surely anything but our mission. I fear it may be essentially counterproductive.

Don't get me wrong. I love competitive debate. Competition is not only inevitable; it is essential. And it is fun! But I firmly believe that real progress has never been made through competition on its own. It has always come through cooperation within a framework of competition.

In Hay River we saw a political system based on competitive elections, but government based on consensus. It requires a focus on respectfulness, on patience, and on farsightedness, a freedom from interruptions and heckling strikingly unlike what goes on in the rest of Canada.

I believe we have much to learn from our indigenous people. I believe we need a dose of their extraordinary civility, and that the CSDF can contribute to this, not by giving up debate, but by adding training in the consensus skills so desperately needed in our legislatures, in our courts, and in our marketplace.

As in confrontational debate, there are various formats. Let's experiment with some of them. Let's follow the debates with some sort of consensus component. Then let's get valuable media coverage on the consensus they have reached.

Times change. If we don't change with them, we lose our way.

I now dream of the day when our debating tournaments everywhere will incorporate what I call Competing for Consensus, when new schools won't be overwhelmed by the competition.

Our mission a generation ago was 'civilized disagreement'. Our need today is to complement confrontational debate with training in consensus skills.